

# Comparing the Role of Ships on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius

SAKATA MICHIO

Chiba University of Commerce

## ABSTRACT

The Roman Empire achieved the biggest territory from Britannia to the Euphrates in the age of Trajan. One reason of the success was, of course, the Roman military, which is composed of the garrison at Rome, the provincial Army, the Navy and so on. Among the military divisions, one of the most important, but quite unknown to us is the Roman Navy. In this presentation, roles of the Navy will be examined by researching iconographies of fleets and ships represented on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is no doubt that every historian or archaeologist would admit the importance of the Roman Navy in Ancient Rome. During the Punic Wars in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., the navy accounted for a third of the total Roman military and, during the imperial period, it occupied, in average, more than a tenth of it. This view was probably shared among the Romans in antiquity, as Cicero made a statement, in the first century B.C., that the Master of the sea must inevitably be the master of the empire.

Despite being one of the most important roman military divisions, roles and organizations of the Roman Navy are almost unknown to us for two reasons. First, no historical texts on the Roman Navy is handed down to us except Vegetius, who mentions Roman naval warfare, shipbuilding and the art of navigation in *De re militari* written probably in the fourth century A.D. Second, as Pitassi indicates, among the remains of many shipwrecks dated from 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. to 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., none of them can be identified as warships. Only five river crafts found at Mainz and Ingolstadt are proposed possibly to be used as warship.

Although textual and archaeological evidences that we have are only a few, there is one important, but often overlooked source for understanding the naval force of the Roman army. It is iconographical sources. Especially, the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius may give us important information

on roles of the Roman Navy in war. Trajan's Column was constructed to celebrate the victory in the Dacian wars in AD 113 and, on the relief of the column, the first Dacian war starts at the bottom and scenes move spirally up to the top where the second Dacian war ends. On the other hands, the column of Marcus Aurelius was constructed probably to celebrate a triumph for his German and Sarmatian when Marcus returned to Rome after a multiyear absence. The column of Marcus Aurelius shows us the Marcomannic wars between the Romans and the Germanic tribes from 166 to 180 A.D. The two column reliefs do include depictions of Roman Fleets and boats in war on the frontier.

In the Dacian and the Marcomannic wars, most of the Roman army probably departed from Italy by ship, as represented on the two columns. In addition, borders between the Romans and the Barbarians in the two wars were basically two rivers: the Danube and the Rheine, so it is likely that the Roman Navy may have important roles in the tactics of the Romans.

Previous studies only describe representations of ancient Roman fleets and they have not even classified what kind of ships were used there. Filippo Coarelli and Frank Lepper, who wrote books on the column of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, merely give us descriptions of fleets and ships and no further examinations have not been done.

According to my preliminary research, 28 Roman ships are represented respectively on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius. There is no Barbarian ships represented on both monuments. In this presentation, I would like to, first, classify depictions of warships on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius respectively, then, compare roles of warships in the two columns.

## 2. DISCUSSION

There are mainly two kinds of ships depicted on the Column of Trajan. The first type is a small ship with an oar; the second type is a bireme, that is, a Roman warship having two tiers of oars on each side. Out of 28 ship images, 8 are represented as bireme, while 20 are depicted as small ship. The role in war seem different between the two kinds.

Small ships have two roles: transportation and bridge's base. First, some small ships are used to transport foods, drinks and, in one instance, horses and human beings. For example, in scene 2, two roman soldiers are

represented loading barrels in a ship and another ship already having been loaded bags. Second, they are represented as bridge. In scene 4-5, 8 small boats are connected with each other for Roman soldiers to be able to pass through from one shore to another.

On the other hands, there was one role for bireme. biremes were used to transport Roman soldiers. In scene 79 represented three biremes departing from a port at night. In a bireme seen 8 rowing crew controlled by a man clad in cloak, probably Emperor Trajan. Given that rowing crews are the only representation on the bireme, its main role was to transport rowing crews, who are lower ranked Roman soldiers. Although biremes were probably used also as warship, no naval battles are represented on the column. it is also academically interesting to see that Emperor Trajan is represented, related to bireme, three times: twice on board and once before boarding. In all three scenes, the bireme related to Trajan have similar characteristics.

On the column of Marcus Aurelius, only one kind of ship is represented: small ship. All 28 representations look more or less same. Their roles are, as on the column of Trajan, two: transportation and bridge's base. There are some scenes in which small ships transporting foods. In scene 2, a roman soldier is represented loading barrels in a ship. On the other hands, they are used in some scenes as bridge. In scene 3, nine small boats are connected with each other for Roman soldiers to be able to pass through. Some Researchers propose that the column of Marcus Aurelius was modeled after the Trajan's Column, so it is no surprise that depictions of ships are quite similar between them.

By comparing depictions of ships on the two column, we can find especially two differences. First, only on the Column of Trajan, we can see bireme. Second, on the column of Trajan, there is no Roman soldiers wearing arms on a ship, while on the column of Marcus Aurelius, Roman soldiers always wear helmets, armors and spears on board.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In this presentation, depictions of ships on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius are classified and compared. On the column of Trajan represented two kinds of ship: small ship and bireme. Small ships are mainly used for transportation and bridge's base, while biremes are depicted with a lot of Roman soldiers on board. On the Column of Marcus Aurelius depicted only

small ships. They are, as on the column of Trajan, used for transportation and bridge's base.

## REFERENCES

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*Address: Dr. Michio Sakata, Chiba University of Commerce  
Dainiwakabasou no.101, 3-17-7 Kyouunan-tyou, Musashinoshi, Tokyo,1800023, JAPAN  
E-mails: schoolrock78@gmail.com*